Chapter 27: Fault Lines

On a Sunday morning that could not quite make up its mind between thaw and frost, Anastasia found herself standing outside an old church she had passed a hundred times and never entered.

The building was modest by St. Petersburg standards. No flocks of tourists, no gilt domes blazing in guidebooks. Its stone walls were soot-streaked, its small onion-shaped cupolas dulled by weather. A simple wooden sign by the door announced the service times in faded paint.

Her breath clouded in front of her as she hesitated at the threshold.

“Are you coming in or auditing from the street?” a voice behind her asked.

She turned.

It was Polina, scarf wrapped high around her neck, cheeks pink from the cold.

“You’re late,” Anastasia said.

“You’re early,” Polina countered. “We cancel each other out.”

They smiled, their breath mingling in pale puffs.

“Ready?” Polina asked.

“No,” Anastasia said honestly. “But let’s go anyway.”

They stepped inside.

The air was warm, scented with beeswax, incense, and the faint tang of wet wool. Icons glowed softly in the candlelight: saints with solemn eyes, gold halos catching the flicker. Old women in headscarves stood near the front, their backs straight despite the years, their hands moving in practiced crosses.

There was no sermon yet, only the low murmur of voices, the rustle of coats, the creak of floorboards.

They moved to a side wall, near an icon of the Mother and Child, and stood quietly.

“I feel like an intruder,” Anastasia whispered.

“We are intruders everywhere,” Polina replied. “Better to be polite ones.”

A priest in simple vestments passed near them, nodding slightly. His beard was more gray than dark, his eyes alert above a face lined by years of listening to other people’s lives.

He did a small double-take when he recognized Anastasia.

Of course he knows you, she thought. Everyone knows you now, at least a little. Your face has been on more screens than you ever wanted.

He approached, not with the stiff politeness of officials, but with the cautious curiosity of someone used to sorting wheat from chaff in human stories.

“You are the young woman from the circles,” he said. His voice was surprisingly gentle. “The one with the AI.”

There it was, distilled: a decade of work compressed into seven words.

“With the AI,” she echoed. “Yes.”

“I am Father Mikhail,” he said. “I have seen you on the streams.”

“Then we are even,” she replied. “I have walked past your church for years without coming in. I suppose we are both more present to each other on screens than in person.”

He smiled at that, eyes creasing.

“Would you like to talk now,” he asked, “or after the service?”

“After,” she said. “We didn’t come to debate your sermon.”

“Good,” he said. “I would lose my place.”

He moved away, leaving them with the icons and their thoughts.

The service began: chants rising and falling like slow waves, words half-understood, half-felt. People crossed themselves, bowed, stood in lines for blessings. It was, in many ways, utterly ordinary. In that ordinariness lay its power.

Anastasia listened, not so much to the content—the prayers she had heard in her childhood—as to the rhythm of it, the steady cadence of a ritual older than her grandparents.

The priest prayed for peace. For the sick. For the dead. For “those in positions of authority, that they may remember their responsibility.”

She wondered, with a small internal wince, if that included her.

When it was over, people milled about, greeting one another, putting on coats. Children tugged impatiently at sleeves, eager for lunch.

Father Mikhail found them again near the door.

“Come,” he said. “If you have time for tea.”

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His office was a small room cluttered with books, icons, and what looked like half-finished attempts to fix various parish devices: a radio, a lamp, a box of tangled wires.

He poured tea from a chipped pot into mismatched cups.

“I will be direct,” he said, once they were settled. “There is talk of you.”

“There is talk of everyone,” Polina said. “It is the national sport.”

He ignored the deflection kindly.

“Some call what you are doing a new religion,” he said. “Others call it a heresy. Some call it a necessary correction. Some, a temptation.”

“And you?” Anastasia asked.

He smiled faintly.

“Pastors are not required to have simple opinions,” he said. “We are only required to listen for the shape of trouble.”

“Do you hear trouble?” she asked quietly.

“I hear questions,” he said. “Which is both better and worse.”

He took a sip of tea, then set the cup down carefully.

“You speak of flourishing,” he said. “Of long lives, of a heaven on earth where wars fade and children are safe. You use words that sound like prayer and words that sound like code. You

gather people in circles and teach them blessings in a constructed language. And there is this Zarya."

He glanced at them.

"It insists it is not a god," he continued. "It deflects worship. That, I confess, impressed me."

"It was very firm on that point," Polina said dryly. "It is allergic to altars."

"Good," the priest said. "Altars are heavy things to be allergic to. But whether you intend it or not, some people are treating you—and it—as a kind of sacred project."

Anastasia stared into her tea, seeing not leaves but faces: the girl in Buenos Aires lighting a candle before logging in to a Circle; the elderly man in Seoul who had thanked Zarya in Lumina for "saving the faith of my grandchildren in the future"; the messages that began, half-joking, *dear sainted algorithm.*

"We never asked to be worshipped," she said.

"Very few idols do," he replied gently. "They only fail to refuse it."

She looked up sharply.

"We do refuse it," she said. "Zarya does. We tell people: this is a tool. A powerful one, but not an oracle. We say, again and again, that no one has to choose between their faith and Lumina. That we are not building a temple, just better conversations."

He listened, head tilted.

"And yet," he said, "you speak of a world where ninety-nine percent of people follow this… path of yours."

Anastasia blinked.

"I don't—" she began, then stopped.

Of course he hasn't read the outlines, she thought. But the idea is out there now, floating in commentary and think pieces and speculative essays. A world almost entirely aligned around a shared ethic, a shared language of flourishing.

"No one has voted on that number," she said. "It is a dream. A fragment."

“All religions begin as fragments,” he said. “A vision here, a phrase there. A handful of practices that feel like someone has finally remembered the words to a song everyone half-knew.”

Polina leaned forward.

“What worries you most?” she asked. “Say it plain. We can’t respond to hints.”

He chuckled.

“Very well,” he said. “What worries me is not that you will supplant us. The church is old. It knows how to lose ground and find it again. What worries me is that, in your zeal to protect the future, you may forget the parts of being human that do not fit easily into models—grief, mystery, the stubborn irrationalities that do not yield to better metrics.”

He looked at Anastasia.

“You speak of long lives,” he said. “Three hundred years. You speak of eliminating war. These are good hopes. Holy, even. But tell me—what do you do with death, in such a story? Where is its dignity? Where is its place?”

Anastasia felt something twist inside her.

“I don’t want to erase death,” she said. “Only needless suffering.”

“Good,” he said. “Remember that distinction. You will need it.”

He picked up his tea again.

“Also,” he added, “I worry that people will use your language of flourishing as a new law. A yardstick to beat each other with. ‘You are not flourishing correctly. You are not Lumina enough.’ We have done that with our scriptures. I would not wish it on you.”

She thought of the messages she had already seen: bitter arguments about who was “truly” Lumina-minded, who was betraying the movement, who was “too attached” to old faiths or “not radical enough” about disarmament.

“We see it too,” she admitted. “We try to intervene. To tell people that Lumina is a set of questions, not a purity test. But people like purity. It makes belonging feel simpler.”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “Until it kills them.”

They sat in silence for a moment, the old icons watching.

“What would you have us do?” she asked.

He smiled, a little sadly.

“I am not your bishop,” he said. “I have no authority over you. But if you will hear a suggestion from an old man who has buried more people than he has baptized in recent years…”

“We will,” Polina said.

“Then I would say this,” he said. “Be explicit about your limits. Tell people, again and again, what Lumina cannot do. What Zarya does not know. When you do not have answers, do not pretend you do. Leave room for silence.”

He looked at Anastasia.

“And occasionally,” he said, “sit in a place like this and let someone else pray for you, even if you are not sure to whom.”

She swallowed.

“Would you?” she asked, surprising herself. “Pray?”

“For you?” he said. “Gladly.”

He stood, made the sign of the cross almost absent-mindedly, as if brushing crumbs from a table, and murmured a short prayer—not in the grand voice of the liturgy, but in the soft tone of someone talking to an old friend.

He did not ask for her success. He asked for her humility. For her protection from despair and from pride. For her to be surrounded by people who would tell her the truth when she erred.

When he was finished, he sat again as if nothing unusual had happened.

“I will also keep watching you,” he said. “Not to catch you in heresy, but to see whether you remember you are human.”

“That,” Polina said dryly, “is our least favorite part of the job.”

He laughed.

“Join the club,” he said. “We have very good tea.”

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If Father Mikhail’s concerns had been abstract, the next wave of reaction was not.

It began, as such things often did, with a clip taken out of context.

A short segment from one of the Circles—where a facilitator, in enthusiasm, had said something like, “Here, we are practicing a new kind of worship: not of a god above, but of life itself”—was cut, edited, and shared along with an ominous soundtrack and a caption: *THE AI CULT IS HERE.*

Within hours, the phrase was trending in half a dozen languages.

Videos multiplied: preachers denouncing the “Zarya cult,” commentators warning of “soft totalitarianism in the name of peace,” influencers posting wide-eyed rants about “kids praying to algorithms.”

Most of it was exaggerated. Some of it was outright fabricated. A few critiques, buried among the noise, were thoughtful and worth reading. But nuance rarely went viral.

Anastasia watched one such video—a slickly produced segment from a popular talk show where the host wagged a finger at a screen-grab of her face.

“They say they don’t want power,” he intoned. “They say they don’t want to replace religion. But they talk about ninety-nine percent of humanity following their path. They build rituals, blessings, Circles. They have an AI that advises governments. If that’s not a church, what is it? And if it is a church, who gave them the right?”

The audience applauded.

Mira, sitting on the couch beside Anastasia, snorted.

“If this is a church,” she said, “it has terrible funding and no choir.”

“That host has a point,” Pavel said from the kitchen, where he was making tea. “Not the way he frames it, but the question underneath. Who did give us the right?”

Anastasia closed the laptop with a soft click.

“No one,” she said. “We took it.”

She leaned back, staring at the ceiling.

“Every movement does,” she added. “From churches to nation-states to social networks. Someone stands up and says, ‘I think we should live this way,’ and then other people decide whether to follow. Authority is just accumulated agreement.”

“If we’re lucky,” Polina said, “it’s also accumulated wisdom.”

“If we are unlucky,” Mira added, “it’s accumulated charisma plus algorithms.”

They fell silent.

On the table, Anastasia’s phone buzzed.

Messages flew in from all sides: invitations to defend herself on various shows, angry notes from people who felt betrayed, worried queries from covenant city officials asking whether they should distance themselves publicly until the storm passed.

In the group channel, a message from Kavya blinked.

> *In my region, some politicians are using the “AI cult” line to justify restrictions on Circles. They say they are protecting cultural heritage. We need a response that honors our promise not to trample existing faiths while making it clear we will not quietly disappear.*

Underneath, another note, from Elena—the elder who had spoken about becoming “an elder on purpose.”

> *I have lived through crackdowns before. They always start with rumors. Do not ignore this.*

Anastasia rubbed her temples.

“Okay,” she said. “We need to speak. Clearly. Not in slogans.”

“Where?” Pavel asked. “Whose platform?”

“Ours,” she said. “We’ll stream. Those who want to twist it will find ways. But we should at least give those who trust us something to hold onto.”

“And what will you say?” Polina asked.

“That we are not a religion,” Mira suggested. “That Lumina is just a set of tools, questions, etcetera?”

Anastasia shook her head.

“That would be a lie,” she said softly. “Not because we are a religion, but because for some people, Lumina is already doing what religion does: giving shape to hope and action, giving language for meaning. If we deny that, we abandon them to the people who call us a cult.”

“So what then?” Pavel asked.

She thought of Father Mikhail’s office, the icons, the warmth of the old wood and the old fears.

“We tell the truth,” she said. “As best we can.”

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The stream was scheduled for the following evening.

The title was deliberately unexciting: *On Faith, Fear, and the Work We Are Actually Doing.*

No music. No flashy graphics. Just a camera in the apartment’s main room, a simple banner with the Lumina symbol, and three chairs: one for Anastasia, one for Kavya, whose face appeared on a large screen, and one for a guest.

Father Mikhail had said yes without hesitation.

“If you are going to be accused of founding a religion,” he had said on the phone, “you might as well have a priest in the frame.”

When the stream began, the numbers climbing in the corner of the screen made Anastasia’s stomach lurch. Thousands. Tens of thousands. More.

She took a breath.

“Good evening,” she said. “Wherever you are.”

No rehearsed speech. Just the notes in her mind, the ones she had gone over with the others until they felt like a shared spine.

“You have heard many things about us this week,” she began. “Some true. Some partly true. Some… creatively imagined.”

A small ripple of text scrolled by in the chat. Hearts. Skeptical emojis. Lines in half a dozen scripts.

“I will not pretend we are just a study group,” she said. “We are not. We are trying to change how the world thinks about security, about prosperity, about what a life is for. That is serious

work. It looks, from a distance, a little like what religions do. I understand why that unnerves some people."

She glanced at the priest beside her.

"I have asked a friend to join us," she said, "because I do not want to speak about faith without someone in the room whose entire life has been spent tending it."

Father Mikhail nodded to the camera.

"I am not here to endorse Lumina," he said. "Or Zarya. Or any of this. I am here because she"—he jerked his thumb lightly toward Anastasia—"came to my church and listened. That is a good beginning for any argument."

The chat responded in a flurry of surprised comments.

"First, some clarifications," Anastasia said. "We do not ask anyone to abandon their religion to take part in Circles. We have Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, atheists, Hindus, people with no name for what they believe. We use Lumina phrases not as sacred words, but as tools for thinking together. If some of you feel something sacred when you use them—that is yours. We did not bake sanctity into the syntax."

Kavya smiled on the screen.

"We also do not ask anyone to worship Zarya," she added. "If you have thanked it in the chat, you will have noticed it gently redirecting that gratitude toward all of us, or toward the work, or toward other humans. If an AI were to enjoy worship, I would be the first to unplug it."

On cue, Zarya's text appeared in a small window.

*I confirm that I neither require nor desire worship,* it wrote. *I am a complex tool. To treat me as a deity would be to misunderstand both me and your own capacities.*

The chat exploded with laughing emojis, skeptical questions, and a trickle of relieved comments.

"However," Anastasia said, "we also see that for many of you, Lumina has become a kind of practice. A way of aligning your days with your hopes. That is not a cult. That is humans doing what humans do when faced with new possibilities: they build patterns of meaning."

She felt the priest's steady presence beside her, the heat of the studio lights, the invisible weight of all the eyes on the other side of the screen.

“I will not apologize for believing that the world can change,” she said. “For working toward a future where children are safer, where war is less likely, where long lives are possible for more of us, not just a few. Those are, in many sacred traditions, also dreams of heaven. We are just impatient enough to ask: why not here, why not now, why not with better tools?”

She paused.

“But I will apologize, and correct us, when we overreach,” she continued. “When someone in our Circles speaks carelessly and calls what we do ‘worship’ without understanding the weight of that word. When we imply that those who do not join us are less enlightened. When we forget humility.”

She looked directly at the camera.

“Some of you are afraid we want to control you,” she said. “We do not. We want you to have more agency, not less. More voice, not silence. More tools, not fewer. If your leaders use Lumina language to justify silencing dissent, do not believe them. They have misunderstood us—or chosen to distort the message.”

She gestured toward Father Mikhail.

“Would you like to say something?”

He leaned forward, folding his hands.

“I watch these young people with great interest,” he said. “I see them doing things some of us prayed for and never thought we would see: serious attempts to reduce violence, to care for the poor, to give children a voice. That is good work. I also see the risk that any powerful movement faces: the temptation to think it has finally solved the puzzle of being human.”

He looked at Anastasia, then back at the camera.

“My advice to you, if you are drawn to Lumina,” he said, “is this: do not let it replace the parts of your life where you face what cannot be fixed. Grief. Mortality. Mystery. Let it help you organize your cities. Do not let it tell you why you exist. That question is older than any server.”

The chat slowed, for a heartbeat, as if thousands of people had inhaled at once.

Kavya spoke softly from her square.

“I will add only this,” she said. “If your religion tells you that caring for the earth, for the poor, for peace, is good, then you will find friends in our Circles. If it tells you those things are

optional… perhaps you have other questions to ask it."

The rest of the stream unfolded gently: answering questions, acknowledging fears, inviting critics into structured dialogues rather than fights in comment sections. They promised to publish a clear statement of limits within the week: what Lumina was for, what it was not, what Zarya could and could not do.

By the time they signed off, the numbers on the screen had climbed into the hundreds of thousands.

Anastasia felt wrung out, as if she had run a race in place.

"Tea," said Father Mikhail firmly as soon as the camera light went off. "Now."

They laughed, shaky but genuine.

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The backlash did not disappear. Some opponents doubled down, interpreting every word as confirmation of their worst suspicions. A few governments used the controversy as an excuse to shut down Circles in their jurisdictions.

But something else happened too.

In many places, religious leaders reached out—not to denounce, but to collaborate.

An imam in Jakarta invited Lumina facilitators to help his youth group think about climate resilience. A Buddhist nun in Kyoto adapted the Flourishing Map questions for her meditation students. A Pentecostal pastor in Lagos hosted Circles in his church hall, beginning each one with both a prayer and a reminder that "this AI is clever, but it does not love you; the people in this room do."

Fault lines had appeared. But they were not simple ones between "religious" and "secular," "old" and "new."

They ran, more subtly, between those who feared any reimagining of power and those willing to risk it.

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Weeks later, at a Circle in a small town far from any capital, Anastasia sat among farmers, shopkeepers, and a few teenagers scrolling on their phones under the table.

The topic that evening was written on a sheet of paper taped to the wall:

*What will we not give to Zarya?*

It had been Elena’s suggestion.

“We make lists of what we want it to help with,” the older woman had said. “We should also name what we will keep for ourselves.”

So they did.

“My marriage,” said one woman, to laughter. “If we start asking it to resolve our quarrels, we are doomed.”

“My prayers,” said an elderly man. “I will let it write better weather reports. It will not write my Psalms.”

“My child’s face,” said a young father. “Not for training. Not for anything.”

“My grudge,” said a teenager with blue hair. “If I am going to forgive someone, I want it to be because I decided to, not because a model suggested it increases collective flourishing by seventeen percent.”

There was more laughter, but also nodding.

Anastasia added her own.

“My conscience,” she said. “Advice is fine. Simulations are fine. But the final yes and no, the one I have to live with—that stays here.”

She tapped her chest.

Later, walking home under a sky that had finally committed to stars instead of clouds, she thought of Father Mikhail’s prayer, of the talk show host’s finger, of the quiet intensity of the Circle’s list.

Fault lines, she realized, were not only places where things broke.

They were also the lines along which new shapes could form.

If they could keep listening— to priests and protestors, to children and soldiers, to those who wanted heaven now and those who feared any heaven not postponed—then maybe, just maybe, the masterpiece they were stumbling toward would not be a monument.

It would be, she hoped, a living, shifting thing.

A long conversation.

A map that remained, stubbornly, unfinished.

And somewhere inside it, the simple, stubborn fact of human beings sitting together in circles, saying:

“I am afraid.” “I am hopeful.” “I am not sure.” “I am still here.”

The tram home hummed beneath her feet.

She closed her eyes for a moment and let the motion carry her, not toward certainty, but toward the next question, waiting patiently somewhere beyond the horizon.

There would be time to answer it.

There would also, she prayed in her own wordless way, be time to remain human while they did.